

The Boston Globe

Founded 1872

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Kissinger: 'deMIRVing' is crucial

In a three-page essay in this week's Time magazine, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has thrown his prestige behind a fresh approach to nuclear arms control that would scrap multiple-warhead ballistic missiles (MIRVs) and convert the US arsenal back to a single-warhead design. Kissinger declares past and present arms control proposals, including President Reagan's START approach, as "heading for an intellectual dead end" because of MIRV technology.

Kissinger argues that deMIRVing should be a phased process, if possible matched with a similar conversion on the Soviet side. If the Soviets refuse, however, Kissinger recommends taking the same course unilaterally. He adds that if the Soviets cooperate, both sides could reduce their arsenals to a very low number of weapons — "perhaps 500" — a true minimal deterrent.

The Kissinger essay addresses the most pressing national security issue of the 1980s, reversing the trend to US and Soviet strategic nuclear weapons that could be easily used, or targeted, in a first strike attack. The multiple-warhead missiles spreading through both superpower arsenals make such an attack more likely.

As separately targeted warheads are crammed into the nose cones of ballistic missiles in increasing numbers, the number of potential killers "covering" each target climbs. That redundancy makes the odds of disarming the enemy with a surprise attack more attractive. The rule of thumb is that an attacker needs to count on at least two warheads per target, and preferably more, to dare shoot first. MIRVed missiles, such as the Soviet SS18 or the American MX, give an attacker the chance of hitting five or 10 targets with each shot. Single-warhead missiles, on the other hand, can only hit a single target, so even if they work perfectly, the result is a mindless one-for-one exchange.

Kissinger appears to have followed the outline of a deMIRVing proposal in the Congressional Record a year ago by Tennessee congressman Albert Gore Jr. Gore's proposal caught the eye of arms-control cognoscenti, but it was too complicated to arouse public interest.

Kissinger's essay means that what was seen as an esoteric approach a year ago is now lying on coffee tables throughout the country, including the White House. It will undoubtedly affect the recommendation of the Scowcroft Commission, appointed by President Reagan to decide the fate of the MX.

Like the freeze vote pending in Congress, the Kissinger essay is testimony to the remarkable progress made on arms control in this country within the past year. Not only has a political constituency been created, but the curve of public sophistication on the issues is climbing rapidly.

Kissinger notes that arms control and weapons design, which should be developed in tandem, have been developed in isolation and are proceeding "on separate, increasingly incompatible tracks." He does not question the Reagan Administration's "devotion to arms control," but levels a devastating blow at the START proposal outlined in Reagan's Eureka College speech last May: "Even if the Soviets were to accept our proposal, the Eureka scheme would ... almost surely worsen rather than ease our dangers."

Kissinger traces the history of the SALT treaty approach which he helped design and negotiate, and which he now believes was "doomed" from the outset by the early-'70s deployment of MIRVs, in which he also played a major role. SALT allowed the warhead-target imbalance to develop by failing to restrict MIRVs; the Reagan "reductions" make the first-strike threat worse by increasing the imbalance.

Kissinger calls for a "daring departure" in thinking about arms control. DeMIRVing, he notes, may upset the military industrial complex but will "conclusively end the danger of a first strike" and be "a major contribution to strategic stability and US security."

The Scowcroft Commission is reportedly edging toward a preference for single-warhead missiles, or some "mix" that would greatly downgrade the importance of the MX. Kissinger is ambivalent about the MX, but he's dead right on the basics: Restrain first-strike technology. Scrap MIRVs.

+ Note by committee (maybe) anything, "is useful effect" (in eyes, say, of Public!)